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Jokes as a text type

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Abstract

The authors discuss the opportunity of and provide evidence for the identification of a text type particular to the joke. They present a set of features shared by all jokes, which can be taken as the basis for the construction of a definition of "joke." They then show that jokes satisfy all seven textuality requirements, as presented in an influential definition of "textuality."

When we began to write the preface to this issue of *HUMOR* we both felt that it was necessary to provide some sort of "working definition" of jokes as a form of text. The reasons for choosing that specific kind of text having been discussed in the preface, the next logical step seemed to be to define precisely what kind of texts jokes are. Providing a definition of the text type "joke" proved an endeavor much more important than we had anticipated. It was soon evident that such a definition and the necessary discussions were too broad to be included in the few prefatory remarks to the issue, hence the decision to present them in an autonomous article.

The main question that we tried to answer was whether it is possible to find enough common features in jokes to identify a text type (see Fillmore 1981: 152) particular to the joke. Our answer is twofold. We can show that jokes satisfy all seven textuality requirements, as presented by De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), and we can identify a set of features shared by all jokes. We will begin by examining the latter.

As a starting point we use as an informal sample the jokes quoted by the authors in this issue. The first observation which presents itself is that jokes come in different shapes: simple noun phrases, sentences, question–answer structures, and more complex narrative structures. Some of the

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jokes in the corpus even consist of drawings completed by captions. Our first step will then have to be to show how differences between these various surface structures can be reduced to a single model.

The basic textual patterns of jokes

Narrative texts

We will begin with the most common text type: the narrative. With one exception, all the narrative examples quoted in this issue end with a dialogue, that is, quoted lines attributed to a character (see also Oring 1989: 359). The number of characters is rarely more than two. This dialogue is also minimal: two lines or even simply one. In the case of several lines, they are generally at the end of the text. If not, they do not play a significant part in the text process (that is, they can be easily taken off or transformed).

The dialogue is preceded by one or several sentences that are not attributed to a character. These sentences have the narrative function of giving the necessary information to define the fictitious situation, sometimes place and time reference and situation data, but mainly the social identifications of the characters. These sentences can be replaced by the name or social identification of the characters preceding each line, as in dramatic texts. Sometimes, when the circumstances play no part in the joke or can be inferred from the text, the narrative framing is suppressed. Structurally the setting and dialogue can be compared to Morin's (1966) functions.

From a cultural point of view, we can add that the types of characters, circumstances, and actions are stereotypic; that is, they are rarely characterized more precisely than by some conventional features. From a semantic point of view, the thematic recurrences of typical characters, typical situations, and typical references (sexuality, racism, scatology, etc.) have often been emphasized (see Raskin 1985: 38–40 and chapters 5 and 6; Chanfrault, this issue).

Question–answer structures

Texts with a "question–answer" surface structure without any reference to fictitious characters can be reduced to the dialogic model we have

outlined. It should be pointed out that the opening question is not a real question because the locutor does not expect an answer beyond the listener's silence or avowed ignorance. As in the basic joke pattern, the "question–answer joke" is a fiction of a dialogue, or as Rutelli (1982) calls it a "representation" (*messa in scena*). In this case the actual locutor "L," in place of his/her characters, plays two parts: that of a fictitious locutor "l" asking a question and the part of a fictitious allocutor "a," giving a silly answer for the amusement of the real allocutor "A" (see Ducrot 1984). The speech act in which "L" engages does not qualify as a sincere speech act of asking.

One-sentence verbal jokes

The class of one-sentence jokes can also be reduced to the narrative model outlined above. Generally these sentences are extracted from their original context of occurrence, which either remains unstated or is summarized by the author before or after they are quoted. As a result, the complete semantic device where the humorous effect lies must be rebuilt from the context of the original occurrence.

For instance, Leeds (this issue) and Laurian (this issue) give a list of quotations from a book; obviously, these sentences are not understood as isolated utterances but as a fragment of a larger context that provides a frame for the successful interpretation. In this original context of utterance we find the same implicit fictitious locutor we have proposed to postulate in the question–answer jokes. F. S. Pearson's collection of "fractured French" punning (see Leeds, this issue) and Rick Detorie's book (see Laurian, this issue) provide such a context.

Isolated one-liners can then be considered as the only explicit lines of implicit fictions, where the apparent locutor is a part played by the authentic locutor that monitors the real situation of occurrence. The unstated part of the joke is the equivalent of the introduction recreating the context of the original utterance, and hence it becomes clear that this type of joke can be described in the same terms as the narrative joke.

Mixed-code messages

A part of the corpus (Chanfrault, this issue) consists of cartoons, which are drawings often completed by captions. These one or two lines are

attributed to the drawn characters, comment on the action, or are even appended as a title. We could propose the same dialogic interpretation as in the basic narrative jokes: the humorous device lies in the lines uttered by the characters; as a result, the drawing itself would be a graphic equivalent for the narrative introduction, giving the necessary information for the identification of the situation. The caption is thus seen as some sort of "humorous commentary" on the otherwise nonhumorous drawing. The opposite can be also true: for instance Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoons are often based on the contrast between a perfectly "normal" caption and an incongruous drawing. The importance is that the humorous point is created by the interaction of the drawing and the text. Needless to say, the details of the interaction, the modalities of the processing (do readers look at the picture first and read the caption afterward?), and, in general, the decoding of the cartoon remain to be examined in detail. Since a detailed discussion of these issues would require the adoption of a broader (semiotic) framework, we will not pursue them any further.

Jokes as micro-narratives

These observations can now be gathered in a preliminary formulation of a model of the joke-as-a-text. The joke can be characterized as revolving around a verbal interaction frame in a given situation. The first part of the joke introduces the minimal features of that situation. If not necessary for the punch line to function, it remains implicit. The subsequent dialogue (rarely replaced by a mute action) is the real kernel of the joke text. Circumstances and dialogue are the minimum components necessary to form a micro-narrative: a situation, characters, and an action (here, verbal interaction).

A narration must lead to an end that "closes" the narrative by giving a sense to all the preceding information, that is, justifying the presence of every previous detail. This structural function is performed by the punch line. Here lies the essence of the joke since it is responsible for the characteristic perlocutionary act of verbal joking: to make the allocutor(s) laugh (Oring 1989; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1981).

To give a general definition of "punch line" is not easy (see for instance Fry 1963). A detailed semantic discussion is to be found in Raskin (1985). A large majority of humor researchers agree that the punch line is a

complete break with predictability. This is currently known as "incongruity." But beyond incongruity there is a possible idiosyncratic coherence that is not in conformity with the previously shared rules but which reorganizes the previous textual data in its own way and finally gives a "sense" to the last line (even outrageously nonsensical) (Forabosco, this issue). A possible hypothesis is that the "humorous felicity" of a joke depends on two inversely proportional qualities: the incongruity must somehow resist interpretation so as to appear creative, original, and unpredictable with the usual interpretation processes available; and on the other hand, the same incongruity must be interpretable, that is, obey an idiosyncratic rule that can be identified rapidly enough for the joke to be felicitous (see Oring 1989: 358).

At this point a legitimate question might be asked: if the punch line is the essential element of the joke, why have a narrative introduction at all? As we have pointed out, the punch line is an incongruous element in the text. Incongruity is a relational concept. An object is not incongruous *per se*; it becomes such if introduced into a situation in which it does not fit or by comparison to a model of the object from which it differs. The function of the narrative introduction is precisely that of setting the background against which and in reason of which the punch line appears incongruous.

Length

Finally a superficial but not irrelevant parameter is the size of the text itself. The examples have various lengths: the shortest is five words long, the longest about 90 words, the average about 40 words. It is commonly accepted that jokes tend to be short, but this has not always been the case: Campanile (1961: 34) notes that jokes at the beginning of the century were much more longwinded than they tend to be today.

Summing up: jokes are very short narrative fictions reduced to the most economical form. The narratives are most generally focused on a short dialogue (often not more than two lines) between rarely more than two characters (never more than four). The essential pattern is that the verbal joke is oriented to and by a punch line, which lies at the end of the text. The function of the narrative is that of providing enough contextual information for the punch line to build upon, or rather to be incongruous with.

Jokes as cooperative texts

An interesting issue which has been so far left in the background of the discussion is that of the locutors' conversational attitude. The question can be reduced to an alternative: either narrative jokes are humorous because they offer the audience the representation of a verbal communication disturbance (that is, any violation of a linguistic rule), or they are such because they are a verbal communication disturbance. The question could be worded differently: is the violation of a linguistic (or social, etc.) rule in jokes real or pretended? If jokes were to be a real violation of linguistic rules, they would be noncooperative texts (Grice 1975; Raskin 1985). On the other hand, as long as jokes are a conventionally structured form of verbal communication, their perlocutionary success can be interpreted as a proof of their effective cooperative nature. Beyond a level of full disturbance, jokes are a structured mode of communication and, as such, a cooperative enterprise. Raskin (1985) and Attardo (1990) have postulated a special humorous cooperative mode of communication to account for these issues. Several questions remain open, and we hope to address them in future research.

Are jokes for real?

A consequence of the "distorted" quality of the cooperative mode of jokes is that one should not confuse the fictitious situation of the characters and the real situation in which a joke is told. There seems to be an unfortunate tendency to confuse the "world of knowledge" shared by the hearers (the "real" world) with the fictitious world that the characters of the joke fiction share. This latter is artificial, and although it has analogies to the "real" world, it is not (always) a simple image of the "real" world. The fictitious world of the joke can contain several distortions from its model (that is, the real world). Often the essential effects of the fiction are created precisely by interacting with these distortions. Lefort (this issue) calls these "secondary incongruities," and everyone is familiar with the talking animals, elephants in cherry trees, etc., that abound in jokes. It is interesting to note that the stereotypes of ethnic groups (the dumb Pole, the cowardly Italian, the militarist German [see Davies 1990], the oversexed Georgian [see Raskin 1985], etc.) also belong to the fictitious world of the jokes and often bear only the faintest relationship to the real world.

Beyond textual data

If the main structural feature of the average type of verbal joke is to be wholly oriented to its punch line, and every linguistic surface component is devised for the felicitous (Austin 1962) perlocutory effect (to make the audience laugh), this could be enough to define verbal jokes from a strictly formal point of view. Below we shall give some examples of text types that are very close to jokes by the standards of our previous definition but are nevertheless perceived as different by the locutors.

Following our hypothesis that there is an identifiable text type "joke," it should be possible to distinguish a joke from other textual occurrences that produce humorous reactions. In the following paragraphs we will try to outline some of the types of texts that border on jokes but should not be confused with them. The following list is obviously not intended as an exhaustive taxonomy:

— Involuntary humor is uttered without being controlled and intended for such a purpose; this is the result of a problem in the locutor's control over his/her speech: slip of the tongue, howler, logical paralogism, confusion.... In that occurrence, the locutor does not monitor a fictitious utterance; in a way, he/she is "sincere," his/her communication misfires, but it is produced in bona fide communication.

— Situational jokes are essentially improvised, and usually witticisms are appreciated insofar as they are not stereotypes or second-hand plagiarisms. Canned jokes (see Raskin 1985: 138) are made of stereotypical material, even mere repeated textual patterns. Situational jokes, however, have to be suitable to their situation of occurrence exactly; the more subtle their adequacy to the moment, the place, their purpose, their object, and their audience, the greater their social success.

Another characteristic is that situational jokes have to be uttered in a conversation without an immediate introductory co-text like "Hey, guys, did you hear the one about...," etc. That explicit mark and the specific textual surface features are characteristics of jokes. A witticism begins like other serious sentences previously uttered, that is to say that the humorous intention can only be inferred after the punch line, whereas a joke is known to be a joke from the beginning of and even before its occurrence.

— Comic monologues are often difficult to distinguish from jokes from a textual point of view; sometimes they are just a chain of punch lines. Humorous short stories or tales, novels, one-man shows, even songs and

other parodies can be differentiated from mere jokes by their greater complexity and elaboration and, consequently, by the fact that they are "works of art," attributed to an artist. The "social status" of the locutor (a stand-up comedian, for instance) makes him a specialist of joking. Jokes are usually simpler and anonymous.

— Anecdotes appear to be very close to narrative jokes. Often they feature characters involved in a funny dialogue or action; sometimes jokes share with anecdotes the quality of verisimilitude (that is, they might have happened in real contexts). But anecdotes are introduced to the audience as being authentic; they are supposed to be facts of which the locutor was the witness or of which at least he is a faithful historian. Usually the characters of the story are real people, known to the audience, and the recounted facts must be original and not stereotypical for the anecdote to be appreciated. Often anecdotes make a point (see also Polanyi 1989; Oring 1989) or offer some sort of contribution to the conversation.

From this discussion it follows that a merely formal description of the joke is not enough to characterize the specificity of this text type. The model that describes and distinguishes jokes from other humorous texts must be integrated into a comprehensive model of texts (for instance, Schmidt 1973, 1976; see also Attardo 1988), that is, have a pragmatic outlook. Thus, a joke is an anonymous, partially or completely recycled text that contains a non–bona-fide linguistic/cognitive disturbance (the punch line) that "closes" the previous text. The text itself is tendentially short and contains the basic features of a narrative.

The epistemological interest of jokes

Jokes as useful micro-texts

We have described a joke as a "micro-narrative," that is, one of the smallest forms of conventional narrative text types that can be encountered in discourse. A micro-narrative is consequently a "micro-text," a sample of the smallest occurrences which meet the standards of textuality. Jokes are interesting material for researchers insofar as they are at the same time complex, concise, and complete ("closed") texts.

In the following section we examine in detail one influential definition of textuality and show how each of the criteria of textuality is relevant to jokes and how jokes can highlight some of the issues involved in the phenomena described by the criteria.

Jokes as texts

"Textuality" is a fundamental concept in all disciplines that are more or less involved in discourse analysis. Depending on the discipline its definition may vary. The text model presented by De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) is one example of such definitions. Following Searle (1969) they define the concrete textual communication on the basis of seven constitutive and three regulative principles. The latter are efficiency (minimum expenditure of effort by the participants), effectiveness (optimum attainment of a goal), and appropriateness. A text is efficient, effective, and appropriate when it respects seven standards of textuality: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality.

On textual data: cohesion and coherence

Cohesion is given to the text by grammatical dependencies that mutually connect the surface components (for example, syntax); coherence is the configuration of cognitive content that underlies the surface text (that is, its meaning). The processing of the joke that ultimately finds a coherence in an otherwise apparently incoherent surface data (the text) is a good example of hypotheses put forward by the hearer to interpret a text on the principle of assumed coherence. The joke is a typical example of distance between the surface structure and the inferential processing necessary to the understanding of the text.

Producer's and receiver's attitudes

When we define jokes as a voluntary trigger of laughter we introduce intentionality. Intentionality concerns the text producer's plans and goals; to state that jokes are either a rhetorical device in an argumentation or an indirect aggression or that they express the locutor's obsessions is to touch upon this notion. The receiver's attitude is connected to acceptabil-

ity. It determines how far the set of occurrences provided by the producer has "some use or relevance" (De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 7) for him/her. Acceptability concerns, for instance, the psychological issues of understanding and appreciating jokes.

Verbal interaction rules

Informativity "concerns the extent to which the occurrences of the presented text are expected vs. unexpected or known vs. unknown" (De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981: 9). This is a crucial point directly related to what psychologists call incongruity. To be felicitous, a joke must be a brief puzzle for the receiver until the punch line is delivered (see above).

Situationality is concerned with the factors which make the text relevant to the situation in which it occurs. Sociologists and ethnologists work to describe the social situations and functions of joking. Obviously to be successful a joker must respect rather precise, though unstated, interactional rules and monitor the informativity level and situational relevance of the joke. Incorrect evaluation of the audience's availability of scripts for humorous purposes is a major cause of failure in humorous attempts.

Intertextuality

The seventh criterion submitted by De Beaugrande and Dressler is intertextuality, which addresses the fact that the utilization of a given text is always "dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts" (1981: 10). Intertextuality is relevant for co-textual reference (for instance in an anthology of jokes), situational copresence (for example, jokes inspired from the first told at a party), imitation, parody, stereotypes, etc. It is also indispensable for the description of "second-degree jokes" (Attardo 1988). But first and foremost, intertextuality allows the locutor to internalize progressively the different text types, classes of texts which share typical characteristics. In that sense, jokes are obvious examples of linguistic and cognitive stereotypes, almost a syntax of patterns and a lexicon of themes (on these issues see Attardo and Raskin 1991). Genetic psychology shows how the ability to recognize and memorize the semantic and structural patterns of jokes is a capacity

which has to be learned (Lefort 1987; McGhee 1971). Obviously familiarity with joking and jokes plays a significant part in the successful reaction of the receiver.

It is easy to see that each of the seven criteria of textuality is met by a successful joke, and, because of this fact, jokes can profitably be used as examples of well-formed, self-contained texts.

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Book reviews

Robert Muller: *The World Joke Book*. Warwick, NY: Amity House, 1988. 162 pp. $9.95.
Larry Wilde: *Library of Laughter*. The Sea Ranch, California: Jester Press, 1988. v+250 pp., bibliography. $20.00.

There has never been a shortage of volumes of joke collections. New ones are constantly added to the existing ones, and many jokes in slightly different versions are to be found in several of them. These two joke collections are recent additions to the extensive repertory of humor material. Muller, who worked as an assistant secretary general at the United Nations, claims his collection to be international. All continents are represented here. While jokes from Africa and the Middle East are not further categorized according to the presumed country of origin, others are listed separately for five countries in Asia, four in Latin America, sixteen in Europe, and two in North America.

In a very brief forward, Muller states that laughter is "a major means of 'communication' between human beings" and informs us that during his long career at the UN he frequently observed how jokes reduced the tensions that arose in diplomatic negotiations, talks, receptions, and dinners. The jokes and humorous stories presented in this collection are ones he heard at the UN during his many years of service. His sole purpose in putting together this collection is "to contribute to reading enjoyment, international understanding, contribute to a happier, healthier, more joyful world" (p. 2).

Muller does not make clear what criteria he used to categorize these jokes as presumably originating from the countries to which they are assigned. There are many political jokes in the collection, including several about ambassadors, diplomats, and staff members at the United Nations.

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